

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
August 17, 2014

## Hope Is A Muscle

*Dare to practice hope. Dare to let the assurance steal upon you  
that something is coming, something greater, deeper, not merely more,  
but more so. ~Steve Garnnaas Holmes*

*Hope Is A Muscle*, the title for today's sermon, second in a series on spiritual convictions and what matters most, came to me abruptly during Stanford's Commencement this past June. Melinda and Bill Gates, philanthropists and co-chairs of the Gates Foundation, were chosen to deliver the commencement address to our most recent graduates. What struck me quite profoundly as they spoke is that they are more optimistic now than ever. On their journey, that optimism has clearly evolved, but they were both strongly convinced about how that optimism – and ours – can do more – and for more people. "Optimism," they suggested, "is often dismissed as false hope. But there is also false hopelessness. The attitude that says we can't defeat poverty and disease." Bill and Melinda Gates are spending time in places around our world that they have never been before. South Africa, South Asia, South Los Angeles, India to name a few – and what they have seen has without a doubt taken them aback. As Bill Gates put it: I thought I understood the world's problems, but I was blind to the most important ones. He has seen statistics on poverty, but he had never really SEEN the kind of poverty he witnessed where people lived with no water, no electricity, and no toilets, whose homes were tin shacks he admitted. I had to ask myself, do I still believe that innovation can solve the world's toughest problems? He promised himself that before he returned to Africa, he would find out more about what keeps people poor. In their speech, Melinda and Bill Gates described some devastating scenes, and in doing so wanted to make the strongest case they could for the power of optimism – and I would rather say – for the power of hope. And that's when it dawned on me, as I listened to them describe the proximity they had to immense suffering in our world, that what they were doing was exercising that hope, like a muscle. They have made a choice to engage and not remain on the sidelines or help from a distance. They

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have put themselves in the middle of some of the most egregious suffering human beings. Of course, the cynic in any of us could respond by noting that these are billionaires, people who have prospered from the founding and success of Microsoft Corporation and can travel to and do anything they want with their time and resources. Precisely my point. Which is why I choose to not spend too much time eating from the table or opening the door to a kind of dismissiveness toward anyone, whoever they may be, exercising their muscles, not at the local gym but way beyond to bring hope and good into a deeply troubling world. And thus hope, and the practice of it, remains one of my strongest and most relentless spiritual convictions. The Gates, in their appeal to these Stanford graduates to take their genius and optimism and empathy to change the world in ways that will make others optimistic and hopeful too, also are realistic. They understand, as they said, that these students have careers to launch, debts to pay, spouses to meet and that may be all they can do for now. And yet, it was Melinda Gates who gave me great pause, when at the conclusion of their address said: But in the course of your lives, without any plan on your part, you'll come to see suffering that will break your heart. When it happens, and it will, don't turn away from it; turn toward it. That is the moment when change is born.

Many of us know and are aware of much of the suffering currently battering us here and around the world. I named some of that last Sunday. The beat goes on. Let's consider this week. A dear friend and mentor, African American, reminded me in the face of the inexplicable situation in Ferguson, Missouri when he wrote: *My question is this: After the cameras are turned off and the social media rage has cooled down again, will I still awaken from the nightmares of my childhood to the sight of paramilitary forces in urban neighborhoods gleaming through the summer haze and unarmed black bodies lying in the street? What will it take for this country to relegate these images to the realm of tragic memory and nightmare? I wonder.*

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The suicide and death of a beloved actor, comedian and human being in Robin Williams has brought deep both deep sadness as well as raw personal and collective reflection about those who suffer with depression and other forms of mental illness. Much does give us wonder alongside so many unanswered questions and relentless injustices. As we wait for change to be born. How shall we speak of hope, and more so, practice it? Glib reassurances and false hope can truly sharpen the sting of sorrows already too deep for tears. “Wait without hope,” T.S. Eliot wrote, “for hope would be hope for the wrong thing.” This poetic text from Four Quartets ends though with this: But the faith and the hope and the love are all in the waiting. It is better, Eliot suggests, to tolerate for a time the sense of abandonment and utter bereftness that drove even Jesus to cry out: Why have you abandoned me? - then to grasp at what is not hope. When we do that, we foreclose the gift of real hope that comes to those who consent to wait. And to be sure, we all know we are waiting for many things today. Waiting may be the most maddening and difficult moral and psychological challenges that life presents to us. But when waiting is inevitable, perhaps we can think of it as more of a summoning. When there is nothing to do but wait, we might discover in what sense it can be true that the faith and the hope and the love are all in the waiting.

There is waiting evident in this gospel story today too. It is also a difficult passage to resolve. It is Jesus encounter with a Canaanite woman, in a region where racial stereotypes and bigotry inform all encounters with Israelites and Canaanites. The disciples walk with full attention, informed by the stories of animosity and violence, the commentaries tell us. Then one of them, a resident of this alien territory, shouts at Jesus, but these are not the expected shouts of bigotry that have come to characterize the relationships of mutual disdain. Rather, it is the earnest and desperate plea of a mother. Yes, she is a Gentile, a citizen of a region that probably worshipped Herod, the terrorizing King. Yes, she is a Canaanite. But she is also a mother with a troubled child, and in her desperate cries as a concerned parent, she

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is asking for help from someone who has a reputation for healing the sick. She makes a compelling appeal by addressing Jesus respectfully as Lord and Son of David with her petition on behalf of her daughter. And this is where the trouble comes. Jesus does not answer her, his silence his most civil response initially. Then he refers to this woman as a dog – “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” the text reads. Referring to Canaanites as dogs was a favorite and familiar insult apparently in those days. It has the same tone for any woman called a dog in a high school hallway. I know what this feels like.

This is what some of us call a terrible text. It’s not what we expect, because we sure wish Jesus had responded differently. Sure, I the preacher of the day could soften it or nuance it by saying in the end the Canaanite woman was finally granted her plea. Or that it’s about radical inclusion. Instead, I choose to square off with the reality that Jesus or God or whatever deity we choose to name does not always come through as we expect. Within this story and in our own stories, even those do not always conform to what we hope for. And so, despite this, how do we respond and re-engage our faith? How do we remain hopeful? Honest engagement not only with difficult religious texts like this one, as well as honest engagement with seriously troubling times validates those questions in my mind. And this is where T.S Eliot may have it right. This is where we discover that the faith and the hope and the love are all in the waiting. And this is where we get to practice and to flex our muscles of hope regardless. It is a crazy system when I think about it. We imagine or want God to wave a magic spirit stick to make it all better or perhaps resort to blame everything on God and thus discard it altogether. But the system I’ve accepted is not that one. It’s something else. One that writer Anne Lamott describes so well in her book, *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*. “ If there is a God, and most days I do think there is, He or She does not need us to bring hope and new life back into our lives, but keeps letting us help. But, a young preacher friend, Lamott continued, pointed out to her that God could do anything God wanted, heal and create through weather or

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visions or the ever popular tongues of fire, but instead chooses us to be the way, to help, to share, to

draw close. To me, says Lamott, this is a terrible idea. No offense. Look at us. Look at the dry bones of the ruined people in Ezekiel. This prophet, who probably looked like a complete nut, had a vision of these bones coming back to life, become people again. His compassion and witness was the breeze that stirred them, the spirit, which is an infusion of energy, which is life. He roused them and got them back to their feet. Again, if there is a God, He or She does not need Ezekiel...but chooses people. What a crazy system.”

Please do not misunderstand me. The psalm that Dodie read for us is not accidental. It recognizes that God can and still does bless and nourish us. We hear good news in this psalm about who is in and who is out and where fairness may be found in an upside down world. But even here we find the endless wrestling among people, for scholars tell us that even the Psalms is an exploration about the distribution of power in the world, about how justice is meted out socially and materially, and about whether or not we can trust the character of God to be just. And yet, hope springs eternal, the common saying goes. As one writer put it: Hope springs recurrently in us because it springs ultimately too from the heart of God. Faced with the ignorance and rebellion of humanity, I still believe that God hopes for the best too. The vibrant God of Torah and the Prophets responds passionately to the ways humans frustrate or further the divine desire for the well being of humanity, earth and all its creatures. The God of always springing hope has our backs when we are tempted toward hopelessness, and is both the ground and goal of our deepest hopes.

And this is why I am convinced more than ever that it is essentially up to us. We, the people. Crazy system that it is, say what you will. Yes, people like Bill and Melinda Gates –and all the unnamed or unknown ordinary living saints in this world

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confronting the seemingly intractable problems here, in West Africa, Gaza, Missouri, Central America, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria and on and on. People who remind me

that hope is a muscle. This includes you and me. Hope is our legacy. It is a practice, a way of life, and even a relationship with the One who is the source in whose embrace we live even in our darkest hours, drawing upon a hope, like God's peace, that passes all understanding.

I leave you with this, a piece that I am keeping close in the waiting of these days, along with what I read for you last week from the poet William Stafford about the thread that doesn't change, of which we must never let go.

Pastor, songwriter and poet Steve Garnaas – Holmes wrote this:

*Dare to practice hope. Dare to let the assurance steal upon you that something is coming, something greater, deeper, not merely more, but more so. This is not cheap optimism that can be bought in any market, nor a careful figuring of odds that can always be beat. Nor mindless abandon. I mean attentiveness to the dense but dappled energy that rises within. I mean willingness to be taken up, to be wielded deftly in this rough world by an art that is beyond you. YOU are a thread in a tapestry too large for you ever to see, a single leaf in springtime. Practice hope: let summer unfurl itself in you and then, only afterward, will you know that miracle of which already you are a living sign.*

Dear friends, let us press on and be of good courage. I urge all of us, each and every one, to keep flexing our muscles of hope. Our own lives and the lives of others depend on that.